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TRUE STORY OF THE ALMANAC USED BY ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN THE FAMOUS TRIAL OF DUFF ARMSTRONG.

BY DUNCAN FERGUSON.

I have often wondered on hearing of Lincoln's famous Almanac trial at Beardstown, Illinois, in defense of Duff Armstrong for the murder of Metzker at a camp meeting near Latitude 40° north, Longitude 90° west, August 29, 1857, at about 10:00 P. M., why no one took the trouble to clear Lincoln's name of the false statements made by "the man in the street," such as the following:

"Lincoln went to a drug store on State Street, Beardstown, Illinois, and procured a number of almanacs which he took to his room in the hotel, and with them manufactured an almanac, which showed there was no moon on that night of the murder."

"This doctored almanac was introduced to the court and jury and resulted in the acquittal of the prisoner."

I am pleased to be able to refute all such false statements. Lincoln was able to prove by a true almanac of 1857, that the moon was not on the 90° West Meridian, at 10:00 P. M. the night of the murder. The principal prosecuting witness testified to seeing the fatal blow struck with a sling shot, in the hands of Duff Armstrong by the light of the moon, which, he swore was about where the sun was at noon the day of the murder.

The camp meeting grounds where the murder was committed near Latitude 40° north, and Longitude 90° west.

The moon, I find, was on the 90° West Meridian at 7:44 P. M. on August 29, 1857. August 29, 1857, the moon set at 12:51 P. M., hence, the moon was within 69 minutes of setting. Therefore, it was at a low altitude. At that time the declination of the moon was nearly at its maximum South.

The camp meeting grounds were most probably surrounded with trees shutting off the moon's light at such a low

altitude and south declination. There was a new moon on August 19, 1857, at 10:00 A. M., Longitude 90° west. First quarter was August 27, 1857, at 9:00 A. M., Longitude 90° west. The moon was two and one-half days past the first quarter: hence, the moon was about ten and one-half days old, or about five days from full moon.

Had the moon been on the Meridian of Longitude 90° west at 10:00 P. M. it would have shown fairly bright. Those Historians who said that there was no moon in sight at the time of the murder are all in error. At a public meeting in Beardstown, Illinois, February 1909, the Ladies assigned to Mrs. Dr. Scheer the task of writing up the Armstrong trial, on the occasion of the erecting of a tablet by the Ladies' Club of Beardstown, Illinois, February 12, 1909.

I will now enumerate a few of the wrong statements made, in ignorance of the true position of the moon on the date of the murder by well meaning friends of Lincoln:

Mrs. Dr. Scheer from her paper bearing on the position of the moon that night of the murder: "Taking this almanac, Lincoln showed that on the night sworn to and the hour sworn to, the moon had not risen, proving that the whole of this testimony was a perjury."

In Barrett's "Life of Lincoln" in referring to this trial, the author after describing the testimony of the prosecuting witness as to the position of the moon, says: "At this point, Mr. Lincoln produced an almanac which showed at the time referred to by the witness that there was no moon at all and showed it to the jury."

Herndon, in his "Life of Lincoln," in which he gives an account of the trial, says: "Lincoln floored the principal prosecuting witness, who had testified positively to seeing the fatal blow struck in the moon light, by showing from an almanac that the moon had set."

Mr. Gridley, to whom I am indebted for data, very wisely directed a letter to the Professor of Astronomy of the University of Illinois, inquiring the position of the moon in this Latitude 40° north, Longitude 90° west, on the night of

August 29, 1857, when the assault was committed. The reply is as follows:

“Urbana, Ill., March 2, 1909.

Mr. J. M. Gridley,
Virginia, Illinois.

Dear Sir:

Answering yours of February 24, the moon was at first quarter on August 27, 1857, at 9:00 A. M. On the night of August 29, the moon was two days and one-half past first quarter, and crossed the meridian at 7:44 P. M. local time. The time when the moon set was within 15 minutes of midnight, but to give this closer, I would have to know the exact locality for which to compute.

I am,

Very truly yours,

Joel Stebbins,

Director, Observatory.”

“Urbana, Illinois, March 29, 1922.

Mr. J. M. Gridley,
Virginia, Illinois,

Dear Sir:

I have been rather busy of late and have neglected answering your last letter. I computed the time of Moonset for Longitude 90° west of Greenwich and Latitude 40° . On August 29, 1857, I find the moon set at 12:05 P. M., i. e., five minutes after midnight of August 29. You understand this refers to the disappearance of the moon's upper edge below the true horizon. I am sorry that I cannot inform you about the period called the “dark of the moon.” It may have an exact meaning but I can not find the term used in any of the text books, or any Standard work. I am under the impression that the period extends from last quarter until the new moon, but that is only a guess.

On August 19, 1857, there was a new moon at 10:00 A. M. First quarter you have full moon, September 3, at 11:00 P. M. and last quarter on September 10, at 5 P. M.

Hoping this is suitable for your purpose, I am

Very truly yours,

Joel Stebbins,

Director, Observatory.”

I am pleased to note that my findings agree with Mr. Stebbins, with but one exception—the time when the moon set. Stebbins found that the moon set at 12:05 P. M., on August 29, 1857, while I found that the moon set at 12:51 P. M., on August 29, 1857.

According to Mr. Stebbins' finding, the altitude of the moon at 10:00 P. M. would show it much higher than mine. Mine was at 69 minutes before setting while Mr. Stebbins was 1 hour and 55 minutes before setting.

The old Nautical Almanacs and Astronomical Ephemeris do not have the "tables" that our new Nautical Almanacs have for finding the stations not on the meridian of Greenwich, hence, a difference of 46 minutes in time when moon set. I used the 1857 Almanac in combination with that of 1922. The moon will be about the same position August 31, 1922, at 9:43 P. M. that it was in August 29, 1857 at 10:00 P. M., about the same time from setting, about the same altitude and south declination. On August 31, 1922, the moon will be one day nearer to new moon, hence, a little brighter at 9:43 P. M.

The above shows that there was a moon in sight the night of the murder, but that does not change Lincoln's honestly won victory. As the above clearly shows the moon was not over the meridian at the time of the murder, as sworn to by the prosecuting witness.

For a complete History of this now famous case, I recommend all interested to get a copy of the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, Illinois, Vol. 3, No. 1, April, 1910. Two of the directors of the Ill. State Historical Society are our townsmen, Hon. Andrew Russel and Hon. Richard Yates.